

NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5669
VERA HIRSCHBERG

MARCH 30, 1978

THE SUPERTANKER DILEMMA

ANNCR:

THE BREAK-UP OF THE SUPERTANKER AMOCO CADIZ OFF THE BRITTANY COAST IN MID-MARCH CAUSED THE WORLD'S WORST OIL SPILL -- SOME 230,000 TONS OVER 600 SQUARE KILOMETERS OF OCEAN. BUT EVEN AS THAT OIL SLICK GROWS, PLANS CONTINUE TO BUILD EVEN LARGER TANKERS WITH POTENTIAL FOR EVEN GREATER DISASTERS, AS VOA'S VERA HIRSCHBERG REPORTS.

VOICE:

THE AMOCO CADIZ WAS NOWHERE NEAR THE LARGEST SUPERTANKER EVER BUILT. SHIPS NOW PLY THE SEAS WHICH HAVE ONE AND ONE-HALF TIMES HER CAPACITY, MORE THAN HALF A MILLION TONS. AND PLANS EXIST TO BUILD SHIPS TO CARRY NEARLY TRIPLE THE AMOCO CADIZ'S CARGO, OR UP TO 600,000 TONS, IN THE 1980S.

THE SUPERTANKER HAS ITS ORIGINS IN THE SMALL (3,000-TONS) S.S. GLUCKHAUF, WHICH WAS BUILT IN ENGLAND 92 YEARS AGO (1886) TO TRANSPORT OIL ACROSS THE ATLANTIC. BEFORE THE GLUCKHAUF WAS BUILT, OIL HAD BEEN CARRIED IN WOODEN BARRELS AND TIN CASES ABOARD SAILING SHIPS. THE GLUCKHAUF REVOLUTIONIZED THE TRANSPORTATION OF PETROLEUM BY PROVING THAT THE COMPARTMENTED SHELL OF THE VESSEL ITSELF WOULD BE A PRACTICAL AND ECONOMICAL CONTAINER FOR LIQUID BULK CARGOES. GRADUALLY, THE SIZE OF OIL TANKERS INCREASED. BY THE 1950S, SO-CALLED SUPERTANKERS HAD CAPACITIES OF FROM 50,000 TO 60,000 TONS; BY THE 1970S, TWO OR THREE TIMES THAT SIZE. TODAY, AT LEAST ONE 550,000 TON TANKER CARRIES CRUDE OIL BETWEEN THE PERSIAN GULF AND EUROPE AND ANOTHER IS BEING CONSTRUCTED. THESE BEHEMOTHS OF THE SEA STRETCH FOR HUNDREDS OF METERS IN LENGTH, AND RANGE THE

OCEANS FROM THE PERSIAN GULF TO AS FAR AWAY AS JAPAN, A DISTANCE OF SOME 19-THOUSAND KILOMETERS.

IN RECENT YEARS, FOR VARIOUS REASONS, THERE HAS BEEN A PROLIFERATION OF ACCIDENTS INVOLVING SUPERTANKERS WHICH HAVE SPILLED OIL THOUGHOUT THE WORLD'S OCEANS. 1976 WAS THE WORST YEAR FOR SUCH ACCIDENTS SO FAR OVERALL. BUT UNTIL THE AMOCO CAZIZ ACCIDENT, THE WORST SINGLE TANKER SPILL IN HISTORY WAS THAT OF THE TORREY CANYON IN MARCH 1967, OFF SOUTHWEST ENGLAND. IN THAT DISASTER MORE THAN 120,000 TONS OF OIL OOZED INTO THE SEA, WASHING UP ON THE FRENCH AND ENGLISH COASTS.

CAUSES OF OIL SPILLS HAVE INCLUDED BREAKDOWNS, COLLISIONS, GROUNDINGS, RAMMINGS, STRUCTURAL FAILURES, AND, OF COURSE, HUMAN ERROR. BUT WHATEVER THE CAUSE, THE BIGGER THE SHIP, THE MORE OIL IT GENERALLY SPILLS INTO THE SEA. DESPITE THE GROWING EMPHASIS ON SAFER NAVIGATIONAL GEAR AND STRONGER CONSTRUCTION, TANKER SPILLS CONTINUE. AND AS THE APPETITE FOR OIL SHOWS NO SIGN OF DWINDLING IN BOTH THE DEVELOPED AND DEVELOPING WORLD, NATIONS INCREASINGLY ARE BECOMING AWARE THAT THEY MUST PAY THE PRICE, NOT JUST IN MONEY, BUT IN ECONOMIC AND ECOLOGICAL RISK. THE LATEST OIL SPILL IS JUST ONE EXAMPLE. IT CAUSED MILLIONS OF DOLLARS WORTH OF DAMAGE TO BRITANNY'S FISH AND TOURIST INDUSTRIES, DAMAGE THAT PROBABLY WILL NOT BE RECOUPED FOR YEARS TO COME. AND THE DELICATE ECOLOGICAL BALANCE OF THE SEA, THE POTENTIAL FOOD SOURCE FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS, IS ALMOST CERTAINLY THREATENED BY MORE AND BIGGER OIL SPILLS.

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